History of the LSU AgCenter Fig Breeding Program

Michael Polozola (/profiles/mpolozola), Stagg, Jason

LOUISIANA Agriculture

Michael Polozola and Jason Stagg

Figs have been an important fruit crop in Louisiana for over 150 years. Currently, figs are grown as a dooryard fruit crop in every parish of the state, with small market orchards found in southernmost Louisiana for local markets. A "dooryard fruit crop" refers to fruit trees or plants that are grown in the yard or garden area immediately surrounding a home. These crops are typically cultivated for personal use rather than commercial production. They are planted close to the house, making them easily accessible for daily use and are grown on a smaller scale compared to commercial orchards. The primary purpose is for home consumption, including fresh eating, home canning and processing. With the rise of local farmers markets, there is increasing demand for fresh figs for local sales.

The LSU fig breeding program was initiated in the 1950s by horticulture professor Ed O’Rourke to develop fig cultivars suited for the Gulf South region. The initial breeding efforts focused on creating varieties with improved fruiting characteristics, disease resistance and cold tolerance. Although the program was discontinued in the 1960s, elite selections — individual trees showing the most promise — were maintained and evaluated over the years.

In 1997, the program was revived under the leadership of horticulturist Charlie Johnson. A project was initiated to reestablish an evaluation orchard containing these elite selections along with other recommended cultivars for comparison of fruiting characteristics, disease resistance, growth characteristics and cold tolerance for commercial potential. For trialing under different growing conditions, plantings were installed at various research stations across Louisiana. Six selections from this group were chosen for their superior fruiting characteristics to be released as cultivars.

Notable LSU Fig Releases

O’Rourke: Also known as improved Celeste, this variety produces tan-to-light-brown, moderate-sized fruit with a closed eye. The fruit sets upright on a long peduncle (the stalk that supports the fig) and hangs upside down when ripe.

Champagne: Tested as Golden Celeste, this variety has good cold tolerance and produces medium-sized yellow fruit. The tree performs well in areas where Celeste thrives.

Tiger: Known for its good cold tolerance, this variety produces large fruit with a stripe on immature fruit. The trees are small to moderate in size and have a tendency to grow horizontally during the juvenile phase.

LSU Gold: This variety produces large yellow-to-gold fruit on a vigorous and upright-growing tree. It has average resistance to cold and moderate resistance to fig leaf rust. It is recommended for growing in the Gulf Coast area.

LSU Purple: Known for its heavy crop of bright purple fruit, this variety can ripen fruit on very young plants. Most fig varieties require three to four years of juvenile growth before producing ripe fruit, but LSU Purple can produce small crops within one to two years. The fruit quality is reported as good to excellent on older trees. It is recommended for planting in the Gulf Coast area.

Scott’s Black: This selection produces large round and plump good-quality fruit with a dark skin and red pulp. It is known for its intensely delicious flavor and is a top choice for humid, mild winter areas. The variety is disease-resistant and productive, making it a great option for home gardeners in hot, humid Southern regions. It complements current recommended varieties by increasing the diversity of fruit types.

Benefits of Fig Cultivation

Fig trees are relatively easy to cultivate, requiring minimal use of pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, which makes them ideal for organic production systems. Figs hold a special cultural significance in Louisiana, particularly among communities descended from Italian and Sicilian immigrants. These immigrants brought with them a rich tradition of fig cultivation, preservation and culinary use.

Figs have been an integral part of Louisiana's culinary heritage, often preserved and canned for use throughout the year. They are a key ingredient in traditional recipes such as fig preserves and Italian fig cookies, which are cherished in many households. The practice of preserving figs has been passed down through generations, reflecting the deep-rooted cultural connections to this fruit.

Although the LSU AgCenter fig breeding program was discontinued in the 1960s, the germplasm (living genetic resources, such as seeds or tissue) was maintained and released over the years. In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in figs, and people are now seeking out the LSU varieties. Some cultivars, such as LSU Purple and LSU Gold, are common in the nursery trade, while others can be harder to locate. With this renewed interest, there are also many fig varieties circulating as LSU releases that have no connection to the original breeding efforts.

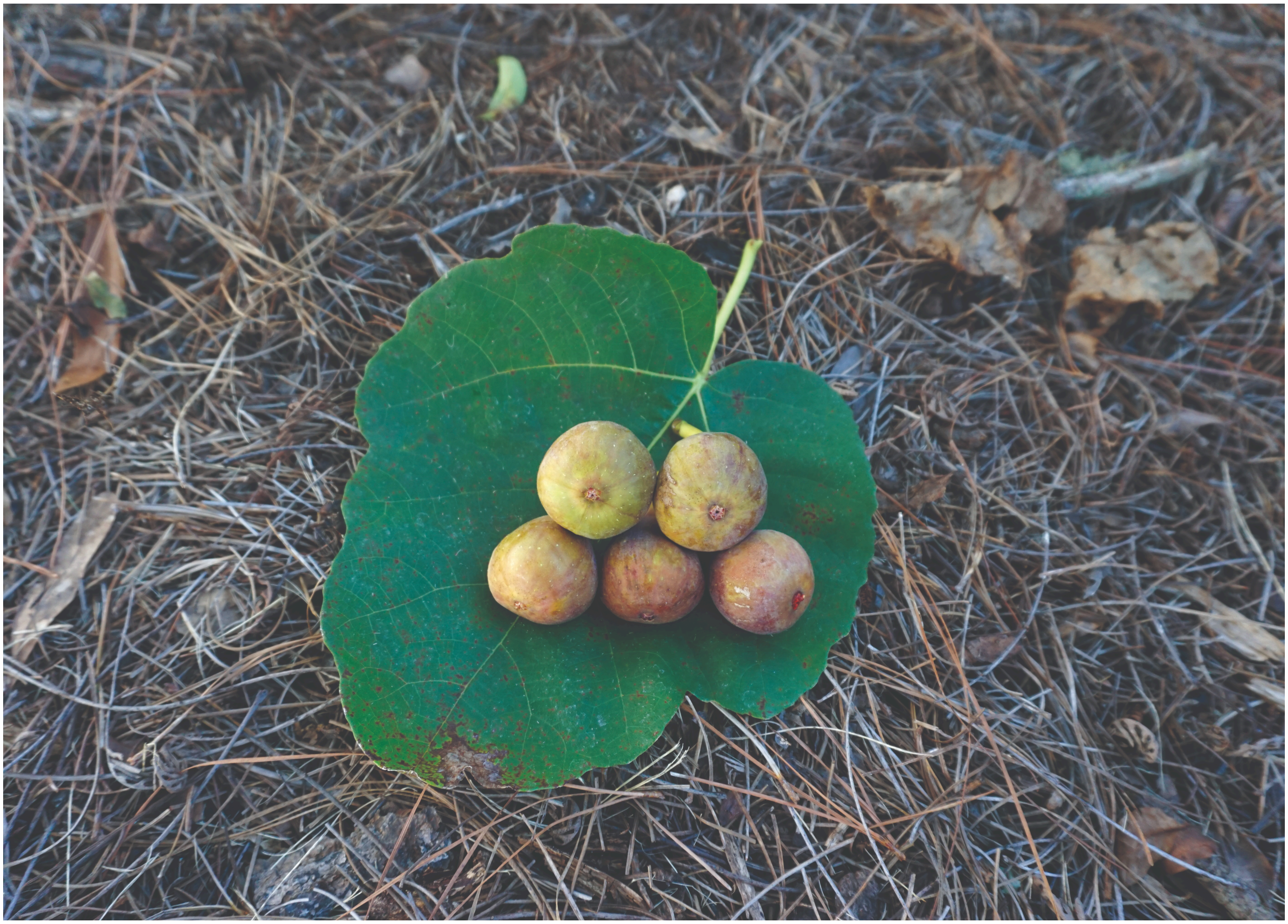
Recently, the LSU AgCenter Dean Lee Research and Extension Center received a generous donation of most of the LSU fig cultivars, along with many other promising varieties. The primary goal of this initiative is to preserve these cultivars and make them more accessible to the public. Although the trees are currently small, the center aims to use them to share cuttings with those interested in growing LSU selections. This effort will help ensure that these unique and valuable fig varieties continue to thrive and be available to home gardeners and local growers, furthering the legacy of the LSU AgCenter's contributions to fig cultivation in the Gulf South region.

LSU's fig cultivars, especially some of the lesser-known and less common ones, still have great potential and unique characteristics that can be excellent for home gardeners. These varieties offer a diverse range of fruit types, colors and flavors, making them a valuable addition to any home garden.

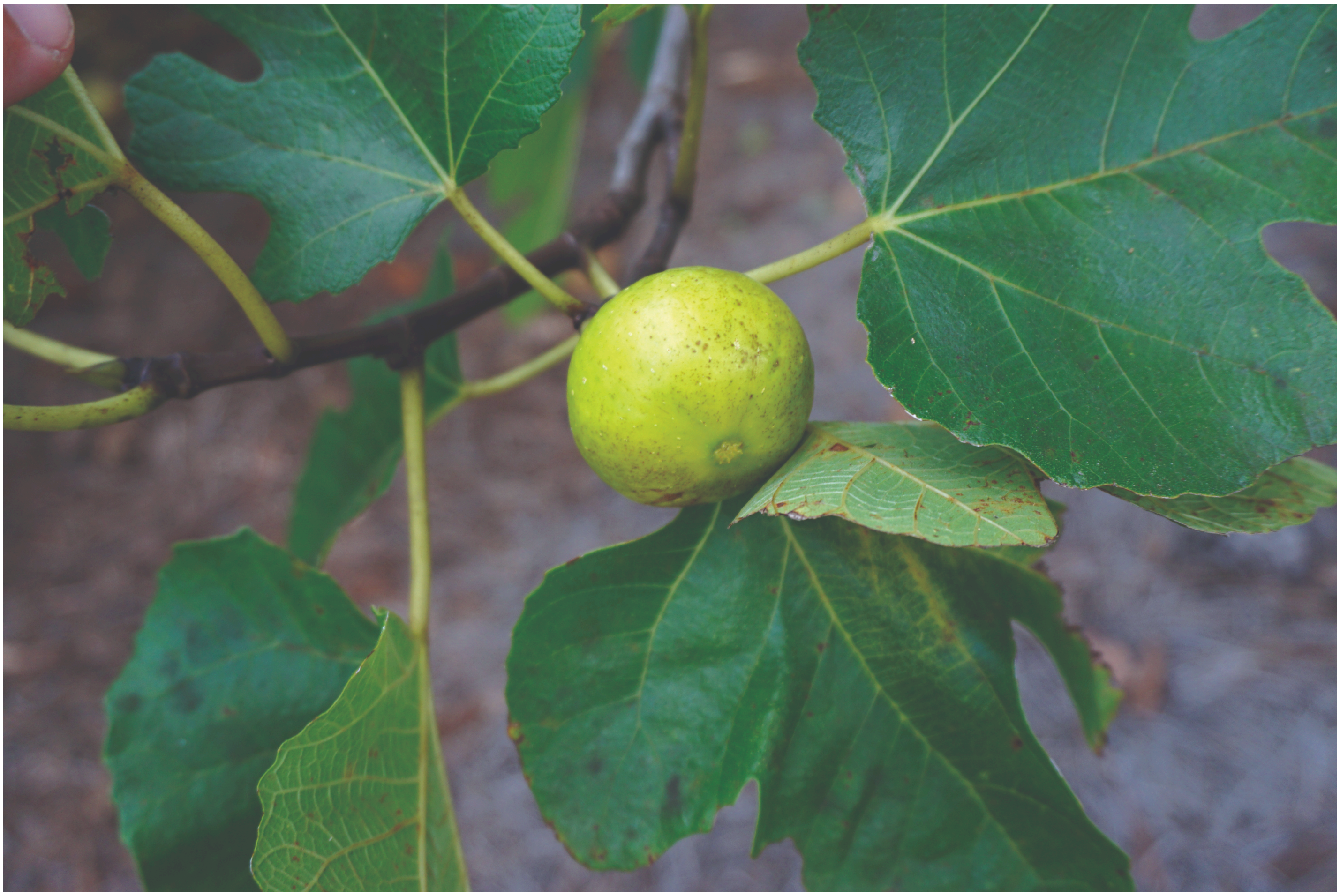
Michael Polozola, the AgCenter Extension state fruit and nut specialist, is stationed at the AgCenter Dean Lee Research and Extension Center in Alexandria. Jason Stagg is an AgCenter horticulturist based at the LSU AgCenter Botanic Gardens at Burden.

This article appears in the spring 2025 edition of Louisiana Agriculture.

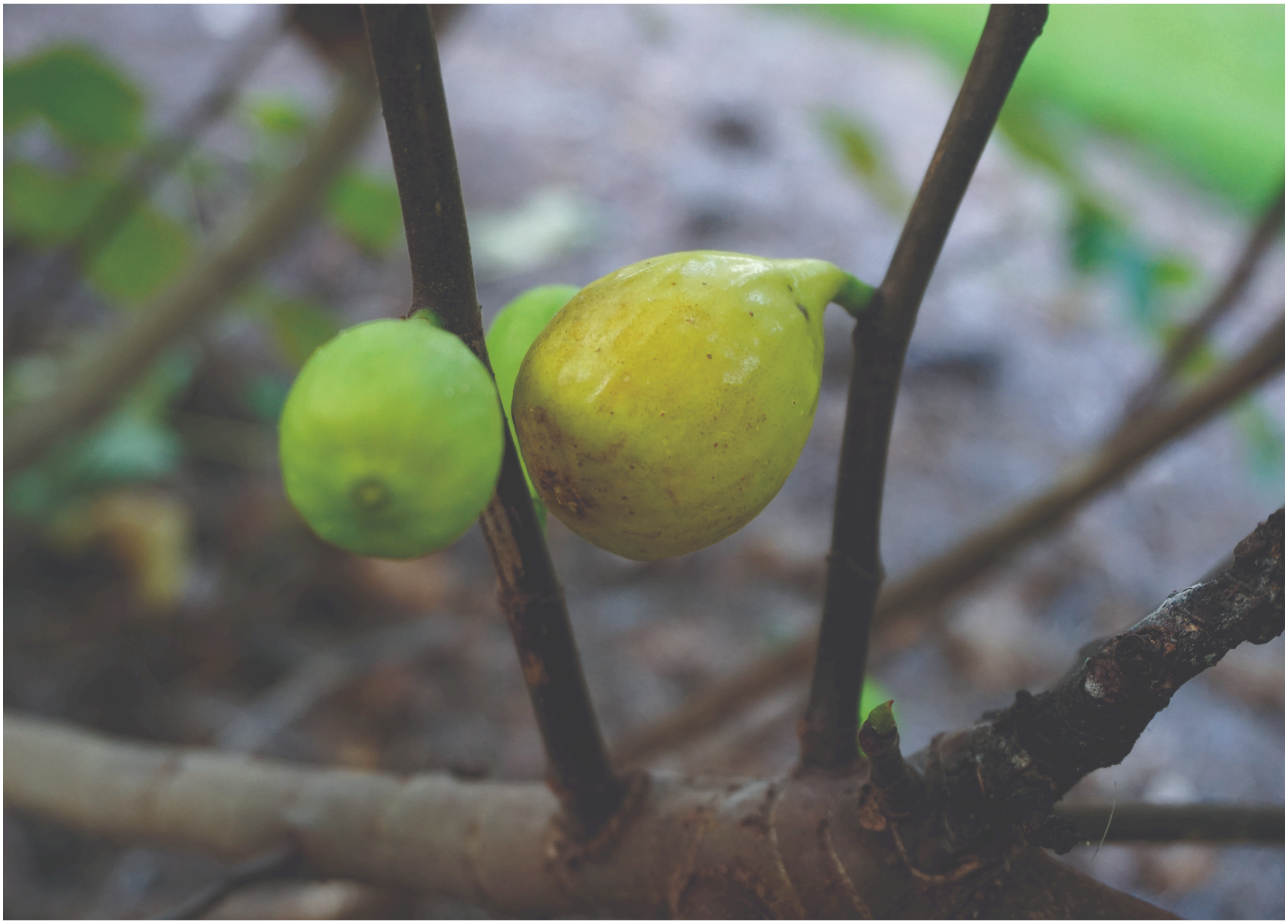
LSU Purple is probably the most recognizable of the LSU-bred varieties because of its dark purple, glossy hue and oblong shape. Photo by Jason Stagg



Tiger is a large-sized fig that develops a distinctive dark stripe before ripening. Photo by Jason Stagg



LSU Gold is the largest fruit of the LSU fig varieties. Photo by Jason Stagg



Champagne is a moderate-sized yellow fruit on robust, upright trees. Photo by Jason Stagg

6/3/2025 2:49:32 PM

Have a question or comment about the information on this page?

Click here to contact us.